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ABSTRACT

A brief review of the types and uses of tests, to aid parents in interpreting their children's test scores, is presented. Tests covered include classroom tests, standardized tests, achievement tests, aptitude tests, norm-referenced tests, and criterion-referenced tests. Issues associated with test reliability and validity are addressed and the differences among correct scores, percentiles, grade equivalent scores, stanine scores, and college admission test scores are identified. Finally, it is recommended that parents: (1) help their children build a positive attitude toward tests and develop good work habits, and (2) discuss test results with their children. (TJH)

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Plain Talk about Tests

The National PTA Educational Testing Service

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TO PARENTS

Good tests that are properly used can help teachers guide the instruction of your children, help them learn more efficiently, and help you understand your children's progress. Though the variety of tests and test scores can be confusing, you as parents can understand the kinds of tests your children may be taking, the purposes and limitations of such tests, and the meaning of test scores that are likely to be reported to you. Moreover, you may find useful the suggestions for helping your child do his or her best on tests.

SOME DIFFERENT TYPES OF TESTS

Most of the tests your child will take are made by teachers for use in their classrooms. These [redacted] are used to find out how much students have learned of what the teacher has been attempting to teach, to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, motivate students, measure their progress, and award grades. These test results immediately direct the teacher to those areas that need more emphasis or they let the teacher know these skills (areas) have been mastered.

Others, designed to be given in thousands of classrooms at different times under standard conditions, are called [redacted]. Some of the most commonly used are the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the SRA (Science Research Associates) Achievement Series. Standardized tests allow the comparison of students in schools throughout the country. Just as it wouldn't be fair to compare students' running speeds if some ran uphill and some ran downhill, it wouldn't be fair to compare test scores if some students were given 15 minutes to take the test and others were given an hour; or if some students were told to guess the answers to questions they were not sure of and others were told to leave them blank. Standardized tests, for a number of different reasons, assure that all test takers are "running the same race."

[redacted] are used to measure what a child has learned in a subject. The final examinations given in most courses are achievement tests. [redacted] tests, on the other hand, measure skills and abilities that are less closely linked to specific subjects. Because they measure certain capabilities that are useful in learning new things, they are used to predict how a student will do in school or to help in career planning or identifying gifted children.

Schools often compare what your child has learned with what other children have learned. Scores on tests such as the California Achievement Tests or the Metropolitan Achievement Tests are given meaning when they're compared with a norm group of

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students who took the same test. These are **norm-referenced tests**. The norm group may be a representative sample from a school district, a state, or the nation. Scores on these tests tell you how your child is doing in math or science or reading compared with other students in the norm group.

Criterion-referenced tests, on the other hand, focus on what a student knows rather than how that student compares with others. You may want to know how well your child can multiply fractions, regardless of how well other children do it. Both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests can be useful for evaluating students. Even if the criterion-referenced test results showed that your child met 17 out of 23 instructional objectives in reading, you might still find it informative to know how his or her scores compared with those of other children.

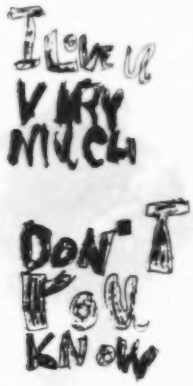
LIMITATIONS OF TESTS

If you measured your child's height with a tape measure and then with a yardstick, you would expect the two measurements to agree very closely. If they didn't, you wouldn't make any important decisions based on the results. The same is true of test scores. In testing, the degree of agreement between test scores that ought to be the same is known as **reliability**. There are always chance factors that affect test scores, such as luck in guessing an answer. No test can contain all of the questions that could be asked about a topic, and students may do better on a test on some days than on others. No test is perfectly reliable. Most test publishers supply your school with reliability information. Ask your child's teacher or principal.

Keep in mind that a score represents a performance on a particular sample of questions given at a particular time. The score might have been different if some other version of the test had been given or if the test had been given at a different time. The more reliable the test, the less likely it is that such chance factors will have a significant effect on students' scores.

Even if a test is highly reliable, its scores still must be interpreted with caution. Tests are like tools: Some are well made and some are not. But even good tests are made to do a particular kind of job and they won't work as well if they're used for something else. If a test does do the job it's designed for, it is said to be **valid.**

Most tests given in school are achievement tests. To be the right (**valid**) tool for that kind of job, a test should ask questions about things the students have had an opportunity to learn. For example, if your child's English course didn't cover the difference between "shall" and "will," questions about that topic should not be used to evaluate his or her achievement in that course. That's why test publishers try to cover most of what is taught in most classrooms. But be aware that they may not include questions that are identical to the content or sequence of courses in your school system. Your child's teacher is a good source of information about how closely the test questions matched the course content.



Aptitude tests taken during the junior or senior year of high school, such as the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), may be used to predict a student's freshman-year performance in college. The validity of such a test depends upon the accuracy of the predictions colleges can make from its scores, and no test can be a perfect predictor. Many things can influence a student's future performance, and a test can measure only a few of them. Moreover, all any test can measure is what the student has had a chance to learn before the test was given. So do not interpret poor aptitude scores as indicators of low potential unless you're sure that the test-taker has had a chance to learn the kinds of skills being tested. For example, even a very bright child who did not understand English thoroughly would receive lower scores on an aptitude test given in English than would an equally bright child fluent in English. Test scores of this kind make more sense when they are used in combination with school grades, class standings, teacher evaluations, and other information in making decisions about students.

Finally, remember that some of the important qualities that influence future performance, such as motivation, persistence, and creativity, cannot be directly measured by any paper-and-pencil test. The design of the test also limits its application. Multiple-choice questions, for instance, cannot directly measure writing ability, although they may evaluate spelling or punctuation skills.

QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK ABOUT SCORES

How do percent correct scores differ from percentiles? A student who gets 45 out of 50 questions correct would receive a **percent correct** score of 90. But be careful with comparisons: Getting 60 percent correct on a difficult test may require more knowledge than getting a 90 on an easy test. While percent correct scores are often used to report the results of classroom tests, **percentiles** are used by test publishers. Percentiles are a totally different matter because they compare a student's score with those of a norm group. A percentile indicates what percent of people in the norm group the student scored above. A percentile of 75, for example, means the student did better than 75 percent of the people in the norm group. It does not mean that the student answered 75 percent of the questions correctly.

What are grade equivalent scores? These are reported as two numbers separated by a decimal point. The first number stands for a grade in school, the second for a tenth of a year. It represents a performance level that is typical of students in that grade at that time of year. A grade equivalent score of 5.5, for example, would mean the student scored about as well on that test as the average student who is halfway through fifth grade. Many people mistakenly think that GE scores represent the lowest acceptable performance for a grade. In fact, half the students in a typical school will be "below grade level." But that doesn't mean there is something wrong with the school or the test. It happens because a GE score is defined as a score that is in the middle for students at a grade level, and half the students in the nation are below the middle, by definition.

Does a high GE score mean my child should move up to the next grade? No, it does not. If a third grade student did very well on a third grade math test and received a score of 6.5, that would mean that the student correctly answered the same number of questions on the test as an average sixth grader might have answered on the same test. It would not indicate that such a student has any of the math skills taught in fourth, fifth, or sixth grade because they were not measured by the third grade test.

What is a stanine score? Stanines are always single-digit numbers. The lowest stanine score is 1 and the highest is 9. An easy way to make sense out of stanines is to think of scores of 1, 2, and 3 as below average, 4, 5, and 6 as average, and 7, 8, and 9 as above average.

What's a good college admissions test score? The answer depends on the college considering it. Different colleges have different expectations of their applicants.

If your son or daughter is planning to go to college, he or she may be taking some of the tests of the College Board's Admissions Testing Program (ATP) or the American College Testing Program (ACT). The ATP consists of the Scholastic Aptitude Test, a Test of Standard Written English, and 15 optional Achievement Tests. ACT has four subtests in English, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Natural Science. Colleges use both ATP and ACT scores for counseling and placement as well as for making admissions decisions.

As a parent, you should look into the tests required by the colleges to which your son or daughter may wish to apply. Your high school counselor can help you interpret the scores in terms of the requirements of those colleges.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Build a positive attitude toward tests. Let your child's teachers know that you're interested in his or her progress, that you want to be kept informed and are willing to do what you can at home to encourage learning. Ask about the kinds of tests that will be used. If you understand the nature and purpose of the tests, you'll be able to explain them to your child in a way that encourages a realistic attitude toward tests and testing. Let your child know that tests are not to be feared but that they should be treated seriously. Be careful not to overemphasize test results; don't give your child the impression that you're judging his or her worth on the basis of a test score.

Develop good work habits. Encourage the kinds of good work habits that are particularly useful in testing situations: paying careful attention to directions, keeping track of time, using time efficiently, avoiding careless errors, and, if time allows, reviewing one's answers.

Discuss test results. You're entitled to see your child's test scores, and it's often helpful to discuss them with his or her teachers. Ask if the results are consistent with your son's or daughter's classroom performance. Let the teacher know if the results are not consistent with what you know about your child's abilities or if there were circumstances (such as illness) that may have influenced the performance on the test. It's important that you understand how the teachers and the school will use the information provided by the test scores. So ask them to discuss this with you in nontechnical terms.

Remember that tests are used to provide information to help educate children, and schools should use more than one kind of assessment to evaluate your child's progress. Work with teachers to help guide your children's learning and ensure that both home and school are properly using the tests and test results.

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